

## Georgia Dental Association Protects Dental Programs for State's Neediest Children

### Overview

In fulfilling its mission to promote the highest professional and ethical standards of oral health care, the Georgia Dental Association (GDA) has a dual role as advocate for providers and patients, and as standard-bearer for the practice of dentistry in the state.

In 2007, Georgia's Medicaid and PeachCare dental programs for low-income children were on the verge of breaking down. Reimbursements to dentists through Medicaid had been historically below market rates and often below costs. Low reimbursements coupled with increased administrative burdens were driving providers from the programs, limiting access to dental care for the state's neediest children.

This situation led the GDA to mobilize an effort to shore-up programs with a dental funding carve-out plus additional streamlining options.

### Objective

Cookerly Public Relations was charged with assisting the association's development and execution of a communications program to educate legislators, key influencers/politicians, dentists, and the media about the benefits of a dental carve-out. A carve-out is a separate funding category in the state's budget.

### Strategy & Tactics

The agency developed a multi-pronged strategy that included: secondary research and focus groups to test perceptions and messages; credible message development; educational fact sheets for legislators; media outreach with statewide media; and special events.

The agency facilitated desk-side editorial briefings with executive leadership at the GDA and editorial boards at newspapers across the state to discuss Medicaid programs and possible solutions to recommend swift action to counter incorrect information.

### Results

GDA staff disseminated their key messages to more than 100 dentists, 80 lawmakers and 15 reporters/editors across the state, including a key interview with the local NPR affiliate. In March 2008, the GDA was able to successfully lobby the legislature for dentists to be included in the list of providers who will receive a 2.5% increase in the reimbursement rates for dental services provided under the Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids programs. Additionally, the governor expressed his belief that switching to one administrator – from five – is a beneficial change.



### Highlights

Cookerly Public Relations assisted the GDA with its communications campaign to garner support for a dental carve-out.

Cookerly brainstormed and helped execute a successful event spotlighting national Give Kids A Smile Day. Approximately 25 volunteer dentists and hygienists provided free dental screenings to nearly 200 children in Atlanta plus 100 children in Toombs County.

Campaign combined: ongoing, collaborative efforts by GDA; support from the Department of Community Health; advocacy of two lawmakers who are dentists; support from dentists statewide; and media visibility.

